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ABSTRACT

A model exit examination for a community college English composition course is presented, along with a discussion of the evaluation criteria used and the content areas assessed by the examination. First, methods of objectively evaluating written examinations are discussed, and analytical scoring methods are contrasted with the holistic scoring approach. Next, the paper reviews research and literature concerned with writing competence and standards for writing evaluation, and suggests that writing competence consists of a person's ability to write for a variety of purposes and audiences in a manner characterized by adequate substance coherently organized and correctly presented. The paper concludes that the best exit examination for English composition would be one consisting of carefully described writing tasks reflecting the course's content, while at the same time providing the teacher with a useful instrument for rank ordering the writing competence of every student in the class. After presenting the model exit examination, the paper details evaluation criteria for each of the four writing tasks in the examination. Guidelines are provided for determining quality and scope of content, organization and presentation, style and form, and reader response. A bibliography is included. (LAL)

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Toward an Appropriate Exit Examination for English Composition

A Report Funded by Hagerstown Junior College

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I. Explanation of Report

Examinations published to assess English Composition competencies are either objective or written examinations. Objective examinations are presently not highly regarded by the English teaching profession because they are not considered valid instruments to measure writing ability or to predict writing success (Richard Lloyd-Jones, "Primary Trait Scoring" 34). They are primarily measurements of how much knowledge of grammar, usage, or syntax students have retained. Because of these criticisms, most English Composition teachers prefer written examinations.

If the preferred examination is a written one, how could it be objectively evaluated? In the past, the traditional evaluation method for written work was some kind of analytical scoring method. For example, point-values were assigned to content, organization, and mechanics, while each of these basic categories were broken down into smaller units (e.g., organization: syntax, paragraph organization, topic organization, etc.). The objections to this grading method were based on distinctions created by new theories of writing (Lloyd-Jones, 35-36). It was believed, for example, that writing, when viewed as only a product, could be broken down into separable units and evaluated accordingly. However, when writing was viewed as a process regulated by the relationship created by the writing's purpose combined with the demands of a specified audience, then other more relevant criteria for evaluating writing needed to be developed (Lee Odell, "Defining and Assessing Competence in Writing," 107). Out of this concern, analytic grading models were rejected in favor of holistic scoring methods (such as "primary trait scoring"). Such a method views writing in terms of the primary traits that result from a writing's particular purpose and particular audience demands (e.g. writing an argument intended to persuade a principal to extend a

recreational period would contain primary traits different from those produced by a description intended to illustrate a place or setting to people who had never seen it). Holistic scoring requires a rapid, impressionistic reading by raters who have been trained to look for the primary traits generated by the focused requirements of a particular writing assignment (Lloyd-Jones, 42). This scoring method is especially used to assess large writing samples (Arthur N. Applebee, et. al. Writing Trends Across the Decade, 60-73).

However, what this report hopes to illustrate is that an exit examination, intended to assess the competencies achieved by students during a 12 or 15 week English Composition course, must be an examination that not only reflects the content of the course, but also employs evaluation criteria appropriate for that particular examination. The content of any English Composition course should be determined by the course's objectives and by what a particular group of students need. Assuming that all the students in a given composition class have been appropriately placed, it is still necessary (or should be necessary) to evaluate their writing competencies. Before addressing this issue, it is necessary to distinguish between "writing competence" and "language competence."

According to John Mellon, language competence is "possessed by all school-children from kindergarten on. They acquire it uniformly in a way that seems independent of their intelligence (IQ), and wholly as a result of learning processes innately scheduled in every child" ("Language Competence," 23). Mellon suggests that everyone develops language competence through social interaction. However, other skills need to be developed through reading, instruction, and writing practice before writing competence can be achieved (Mellon, 21-64).

It is assumed that the principal outcome of a college-level English Composition course would be for a student to achieve some degree of writing competence. How much writing competence and by what standards should writing competence be measured are two questions that every teacher of English Composition must answer. A few years ago, Charles R. Cooper, along with his associates, closely examined the writing performances produced by a single freshman composition class at SUNY Buffalo and made some interesting observations. For example, it was noted that all students possessed language competence and that no student had serious problems with grammar, usage, or mechanics ("Studying the Writing Abilities of a University Freshman Class," 26). There was, however, greater variation in syntactical skills between the strongest and weakest writers ("Studying the Writing Abilities. . .", 37). There was also great variation in content between the strongest and weakest writers ("Studying the Writing Abilities. . .", 39). Two basic criteria emerged from this study that are useful for assessing writing competence: (1) a competently written essay is both unified and coherent, and (2) a competently written essay has substance (elaboration, interest, focused details, etc.). Another basic idea derived from the study was the consideration, mentioned earlier, that a class of any number of students needs to be evaluated prior to establishing course content. For example, since the SUNY Buffalo class had no problems with grammar, usage or mechanics, it would have been wasteful to schedule instruction in these areas. Conversely, an English Composition class that indicated problems in these areas should receive the requisite instruction.

Another feature of writing competence is a person's ability to write for different purposes and different audiences (Odell, 100). Thus, an English

Composition course should expose students to varieties of purposes and audiences during the course of the semester while emphasizing the importance of substance, coherence, and correctness in grammar, usage, and mechanics.

Most composition theorists agree that grammar usage and mechanics should never receive primary emphasis in composition instruction (Odell, 95-138). Of course no one would deny the importance of correctness in grammar, usage, and mechanics in writing. However, this correctness is primarily achieved through proofreading, editing, and finally, producing a fair copy of the written work. If such correctness is expected for work written in class, then the instructor must allow some time for proofreading and editing. While most English teachers would believe proofreading and editing skills an important ingredient to the writing process, they are not included in the definition of "writing competence."

Writing competence consists, then, of a person's ability to write for a variety of purposes and audiences. Such writing is also characterized by adequate substance coherently organized and correctly presented. The measure of writing competence expected for any given writing task can be controlled by limiting the purpose and by prescribing the audience. It is also necessary to point out to the student that writing <u>always</u> requires a clear understanding of purpose and a recognition of what a particular audience expects to be included in the writing.

The content of the English Composition course may include many different kinds of learning experiences so long as these experiences accommodate the central outcome: helping the student gain some measure of writing competence. Of course, the judgment of the English Composition teacher needs to be employed

in selecting these learning experiences and writing tasks. However, if the writing tasks are too far above or too far below the ability levels of the students in the class, then the evaluation of their writing performance will always be distorted (Lloyd-Jones, 41). Theorists suggest that the only way to appropriately "rank-order" the writing performance of any group of students is to insure that all students are doing the same writing task (Lloyd-Jones, 42). This requirement would be appropriate for the initial assessment of a class's writing competence, and it would also be appropriate as an instrument to measure how much writing competence had been gained by these students during the course of a semester. Therefore, it would seem that the best exit examination for English Composition would be one consisting of carefully described writing tasks reflecting the English Composition course's content, while allowing the teacher a useful instrument for rank-ordering the writing competence of every student in the class.

[What follows is a model exit examination based on my course content. It is assumed that any English teacher could construct a similar examination based on his or her course content.]

II. A Model Exit Examination for English Composition

[A note on course-content. This report is not intended as a prescription for course-content. Rather, it is intended as an illustration of the centrality of "writing competence" as the main objective of English Composition instruction. Undoubtedly, most English teachers would agree on this point, but they would each have their own approach to achieving

such an objective. My English Composition course encompasses the genres of narration, description, exposition, and argumentation. It also provides learning experiences in critical reading skills principally through requiring that students examine other people's arguments before writing their own. Thus, a formal argument is the culminating writing task of my course. My exit examination, therefore, should be a demonstration of the content I develop over the fifteen week semester. Assume this test to take two hours.]

Final Examination

(English Composition)

1. (30 minutes) Write a two paragraph "Letter to the Editor" of your local newspaper. In this letter attempt to persuade the readers that they should (or should not) support a local candidate for election. (You may choose a real or imagined candidate). Try to list the personal qualities of your "candidate" prior to composing your letter. Remember to maintain a reasonable tone and to avoid logical fallacies.

2. (30 minutes) Write a two paragraph report of an event you witnessed within the past week or two. Remember to answer all the journalistic questions (who, what, where, why and how). Assume that your reader is totally unaware of this event's existence.

3. (30 minutes) Write a one paragraph description of a strong feeling you experienced recently. Write with a sense that this feeling needs

to be communicated to someone who is important to you.

[Task number 4 to be given to the student on a separate sheet of paper after one hour.]

4. (30 minutes) Choose writing task 1 or 2 and improve its quality through proofreading and editing. Recopy the work onto this page.

III. Evaluation Criteria

[Note: Alan C. Purves, a professor of English Education at the University of Illinois (Urbana), has, for several years, been involved with assessing the instruction of writing and the instruction of literature throughout the world. In a recent article ("In Search of an Internationally-Valid Scheme for Scoring Compositions"), he collated the responses of hundreds of writing instructors from twelve countries (West and East) and the result was a scoring scheme useful for evaluating any particular writing task.]

General Criteria:

1. Quality and Scope of Content
2. Organization and Presentation
3. Style and Form
4. Personal Response of the Reader

These general categories contain aspects determined by the particular purpose of the writing task. The first three are cognitive criteria, while the last are affective criteria.

A. Writing Task 1 - Purpose: Persuasion

1. Quality and scope of content

Aspects	Criterial Adjectives
Perceptiveness of exploration	Clear, precise, informative
Awareness of complexity	Detailed, penetrating
Amount of relevant evidence	Precise, consistent

2. Organization and Presentation

Aspects	Criterial Adjectives
Focus on thesis	Focused, developed
Organization of whole text	Tightly organized, consistent
Placement of support transitions	Connected

3. Style and Form

Aspects	Criterial Adjectives
Appropriateness to situation	Lively, subtle, fluid
Aptness of wording	Figurative, original
Vividness of language	Poetic, varied
Flow and variety of sentences	Formal

4. Response of Reader

Aspects	Criterial Adjectives
Interest in composition	Convincing, effective, personal
Sense of being persuaded	Honest, sophisticated
Sense of writer as a person	

B. Writing Task 2 - Purpose: Referential (Informative)

1. Quality and Scope of Content

Aspects	Criterial Adjectives
Perceptiveness of exploration	Informative, clear, accurate
Awareness of complexity	Penetrating, detailed
Detail	Critical

2. Organization and Presentation

Aspects	Criterial Adjectives
Focus on topic organization	Focused, tightly organized
Placement of information	Concise, consistent, developed
Transition	Connected

3. Style and Form

Aspects	Criterial Adjectives
Appropriateness to situation	Lively, subtle, figurative
Aptness of wording	Original, fluid
Figures of speech	Varied
Originality	Formal
Flow and variety of sentences	

4. Response of Reader

Aspects	Criterial Adjectives
Interest in composition	Personal
Sense of the writer as a person	Effective, appealing,
Originality	serious, sophisticated

C. Writing Task 3 - Purpose: Emotive (Expressive)

1. Quality and Scope of Content

Aspects	Criterial Adjectives
Perceptiveness of exploration	informative, precise, penetra-
Clarity of Feelings	ting, detailed
Detail	

2. Organization and Presentation

Aspects	Criterial Adjectives
Focus on Main Point	Focused, consistent
Structure	Connected, developed
Transitions	

3. Style and Form

Aspects	Criterial Adjectives
Aptness of wording Figurative language Flow and Variety of Sentence Originality	Lively, subtle, figurative, poetic, original, fluid

4. Response of Reader

Aspects	Criterial Adjectives
Interest, originality	Personal, honest
Sense of person	Effective, appealing

Scoring Weight

Writing task 1 = 4
Writing task 2 = 3
Writing task 3 = 2
Editing 4 = 1
10 = 100%

[Note: Each writing task should be read holistically for the traits listed for each purpose. Then they should be scored for how effectively the purpose has been achieved. Since the examination requires writing tasks with three distinct purposes, it should be a balanced demonstration of writing competence. Of course, the students should also be aware of these scoring criteria early in the semester.]

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